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ABSTRACT

The study reported here is an analysis of discourse in conversations with a Laotian woman who has lived in the United States with her husband and children since 1986. Analysis focuses on the nature of women's agency in Lao and U.S. cultures, highlighting the woman's perception of her changing identities as wife and mother. Excerpts of the conversations are presented and discussed. Implications for English-as-a-Second-Language (ESL) educators for a more nuanced understanding of the acculturation process are also examined. Contains eight references. (MSE)

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Shifting Gender Roles in the Acculturation Process

Daryl Gordon

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Shifting gender roles in the acculturation process

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Within a growing literature which examines the effects of the acculturation process on families, researchers (Ochs 1993; Buijs 1991) have begun to investigate how social identities and gender roles shift through acculturation. This paper presents a discourse analysis of a series of conversations between the author and Pha, a Laotian woman who has lived in the U.S. with her husband and children since 1986. The analysis focuses on the nature of women's agency in Lao and U.S. cultures, highlighting Pha's perception of her changing identities as wife and mother. Implications which ESL educators may draw from a more nuanced understanding of the acculturation process are discussed..

Ochs poses the following question regarding the shifting social identities of immigrant families in the process of acculturation:

> Can we speak of intercultures just as we speak of interlanguages, and what are the interactional and dialectical processes through which old and new constructs give rise to culturally blended social identities? ...How are old, new, or blends of old and new identities interactionally established from one interactional moment to the next in these families? (1993: 302)

This paper will address these questions through a discourse analysis of interviews with Pha, a Laotian woman who has lived in the U.S. with her husband and children since 1986. Examining Pha's con-

struction of women's roles in Laos and contrasting this with her construction of women's roles in the U.S., the analysis will focus on Pha's sense of agency as both wife and mother. This paper will explore the conflict she perceives between these two roles and her attempts to resolve this conflict.

The issue of shifting gender role identities draws on concepts of the constructed nature of social identity. Davies and Harre (1990: 46) comment that "who one is is always an open question with a shifting answer depending upon the positions made available within one's own and others' discursive practices." They emphasize that one's development of self and of the world is interpreted through one's perspective of various categories, including that of male and female, and through participation in discursive practices through which meaning is allocated to these categories. This paper will employ the idea of constructive identity to explore the effect of moving to a different culture in which categories of male and female are radically different.

Ochs similarly examines the discursive construction of social identity, emphasizing the active process of its construction:

> Social identities have a sociohistorical reality independent of language behavior, but in any given actual situation, at any given actual moment, people in those situations are actively constructing their social identities rather than passively living out some cultural prescription for social identity. (Ochs 1993: 296)

These data evidence both aspects of Ochs' statement, examining the ways in which sociocultural and material resources influence the social identities available to women, as well as women's active resistance to being positioned as non-agentic.

Fairclough (1989: 25) provides a perspective through which discourse analysts can view the interconnection of situation, institution, and society within texts. The employment of this heuristic to the complex question of social identity allows one to view connections between situational struggles over the definition of social identity, as well as societal factors which deeply influence social identity. These data demonstrate that while Lao women in the U.S. are agentic in the struggle to change their social identities, material resources of U.S. society play a crucial role in both supporting and encouraging these struggles. Pha mentions that although gender roles in the U.S. are radically different from those in Laos, Laotian men would like to "do the same thing," transporting gender roles and the ideologies underlying them. However, due to of a variety of social factors, including access to welfare and paid work outside the home, women are able to resist this positioning.

Discourse Analysis

This analysis will focus on interviews with Pha about the nature of women's roles within wife-husband and mother-child relationships, focusing on the nature of women's agency in Lao and U.S. cultures. These relationships provide insight into power relations between women and men, illustrating major sources of conflict between the realization of gender roles in the two cultures. The concept of agency, defined here as the ability to make choices, act on them, and take responsibility for those actions, will be explored through the linguistic features of negative construction and modal construction, demonstrating especially what men and women can and cannot do. Also, the consistent metaphors of directionality and mobility will be emphasized, demonstrating the distinction between public and private spheres for men and women.

Pha stressed the significance of marriage for Laotian women in a discussion about the economic status of women in Laos, in which she stated that women cannot work for money outside the home and that there is no welfare system available to poor women with children. Thus, an unmarried Laotian woman is left with little means of economic support; in Pha's words, "Who is pregnant, no father, that's a very, very poor woman. Raise the children alone." Also, because of a powerful proscription within Laotian society against women engaging in sex outside of marriage, women have no societally sanctioned intimate relationships if they do not marry. Thus, marriage is of extreme importance for women both economically and socially. Pha underscores this importance as she talks about the fate of an unmarried pregnant woman in Laos. She states that it is common for a man to abandon an unmarried woman when she becomes pregnant and that parents, shamed by their daughter's pregnancy, often force her to leave the home. When asked about how these women manage to support themselves, Pha replied:

Example 1:

1 I saw somebody born the baby on the ground,
2 on the street.
3 That's make me,
4 when I saw that,
5 I very upset.
6 Because parent don't want her.
7 I don't want to see like that.

In Example, Lines 5-7, Pha's use of phrases like "very upset" and "don't want to see like that" indicate that she views this as a negative situation which should be changed, illustrating her critique of women's social situation while still in Laos. However, she does not clarify her opinion about the sociocultural rules which lead to this situation.

Pha's Construction of Woman's Role as Wife in Laos

In talking about choosing marriage partners, Pha consistently states that the man is the decision-maker and agent, as she does in this passage:

Example 2:

1 Pha: But in my country, if you pregnant, the girl pregnant, but
2 nobody, no,
3 don't have the man get married with you.
4 D: Oh, I see. Oh, really?
5 Pha: Yes.
6 D: So, if a girl gets pregnant, a girl who's a teenager gets pregnant, she
7 won't ever get married.
8 Pha: The man don't want you.

This excerpt is marked with the frequent use of negatives. In Example 2, Pha underscores that a man will not choose to marry a pregnant young woman by the use of three negative statements: "nobody, no, don't." Although double negation is a recognized grammatical form of demonstrating negation, Pha rarely makes use of this form. Thus, her use of repeated negation illustrates her strong evidential stance that a man will reject a woman who has been pregnant (Ochs & Schieffelin, cited in Saunders 1994). Her use of negation in this statement also illustrates that marriage is the expected path for a young woman, whereas not marrying is unexpected and dispreferred. In Line 5, Pha's statement, "The man don't want you," also employs a negative construction. In both of these statements, she attributes agency in the decision to marry to the man who chooses whether the woman is a suitable partner. The woman is positioned as the object about which he decides, and her chastity is an important criteria in his decision-making process.

Pha's comments about the role relationship between husbands and wives continue the theme of men's agency. Pha concisely states the rules a Laotian husband imposes on his new wife "Quit your job, stay home, and you should listen." The use of clear imperatives and

the modal "should" indicate that the husband has the decision-making power within the marriage. The woman's role is centered on the home and involves the receptive skill of listening and, implicitly, following the rules set by the husband. When later asked what women can control or decide within the marriage, Pha responded with a statement demonstrating her construction of Lao husbands as omnipotent:

Example 3:

1 I am your husband.
2 I go anywhere.
3 I do everything.
4 You cannot control me.

Both of these passages, embodying prescriptive rules for wives, are spoken in the first person from the husband's perspective, communicating the rules as a husband speaks them, rather than as a wife would hear them (the perspective from which Pha would experience these words). This contributes to the power of this pronouncement and makes clear that they come, quite literally, from the husband's mouth. This perspective also echoes Pha's earlier statement that a woman should listen to her husband, continuing the theme of women in the deferential position of listener and men in the agentive position as speakers. Pha's choice of such generalizing and totalizing words in Example 3, Lines 2 - 3, as "anywhere" and "everything" indicate her perception of the scope and direction of a man's power within marriage as absolute and unqualified. Against this total power, she juxtaposes the position of the wife as lacking the ability to control the husband's actions.

The following passage provides an expanded version of Pha's construction of the husband-wife relationship in Laos, demonstrating the risks for women who choose to disobey the sociocultural rule that men are the decision-makers in marriage:

Example 4:

1 P: In Laos, husband is control the wife.
2 D: Uh-huh. How?
3 P: Keep the wife at home.
4 D: The wife stays at home, uh-huh.
5 P: The husband go outside.
6 And after dinner, husband go outside.
7 Have the girlfriend, or have the second wife
8 D: Oh, really!
9 P: Third wife, four wife.
10 Except who is a rich man, have seven, eight wives. And, and
11 D: Right.
12 so if you're rich, you have more wives.
13 P: Right, and wife cannot do anything.
14 Just stay home.
15 Take care of children.
16 Cook for children.
17 Cannot out, go outside in the nighttime.
18 The woman cannot.
19 D: Hmm, that's different, huh?
20 P: And then husband control the wife.
21 Make rules for the wife.
22 If wife is, uh, don't listen husband,
23 husband can . fight or kill,
24 something like that.

In Example 4, Lines 1-3, Pha states that husbands control wives through keeping them at home and not allowing them to move outside in the world. Thus, she perceives women's home-centered role not as women's choice, but a means by which men control women. In Lines 5-7, she states that men, on the other hand, have the right to move in the outside world and to have relationships and marriages independent of their first wives. These lines also evidence a theme of movement for men, contrasted by the lack of mobility for women in Line 13. In Lines 13-18, Pha uses a negative construction to convey that women have no control in this situation. After stating that women "cannot do anything," she lists the women's chores within the home. The juxtaposition of these utterances illustrates again her perception

that women lack agency; rather than having chosen the role of caretaker of children and the home, this statement demonstrates her sense that women have been placed into this role. Again, Lines 17-18 Pha employs a negative construction to underscore the rules against women moving outside the home. Finally, in Lines 20-24, she states the severe ramifications of wives' refusal to accept their husbands' control, using a modal construction: "husband can fight or kill, something like that," demonstrating husbands' power to enforce their role as agents through physical abuse or murder.

When asked about the options available to women in a violent or unfulfilling marriage, Pha replies that a woman must be "patient." She also indicates the severe stress this situation places on women, stating that "Some woman is patient, patient a lot and they die for patience." The following excerpt demonstrates Pha's perceptions about the lack of options for Laotian women:

Example 5:

1 D: So, in Laos do husbands and wives get divorced?
2 Can
3 P: No.
4 D: No.
5 P: Can't. If a husband, he cannot get divorced from you,
6 like you is the wife, right?
7 D: Mm-hmm.
8 P: And I don't want to divorce of you, because you is my first lady.
9 You have to stay with me all your life.
10 You can't, you can't have second husband and third husband.
11 If you have second husband or you have boyfriend,
12 I going to kill you.

Pha states that divorce is not an option for women, because husbands do not want to divorce their first wives. Pha's statement in Example 5, Line 8, spoken from the first person perspective of the husband, makes apparent that the decision for divorce is the man's. The use of the strong modal construction "you have to" referring to

the wife in the following line indicates that the woman must follow the rules as dictated by the husband. In addition, the verb " to stay" reinforces women's lack of mobility and position in the home. Her use of the negative construction in Example 5, Line 10 demonstrates her comparison of the rules for wives to those for a husband. Whereas a Laotian husband can take a second wife if he is unhappy or unfulfilled in his marriage, a Laotian wife does not have that right; she must remain in a marriage regardless of its difficulties or danger. Through this overt comparison Pha seems to be underscoring women's lack of agency and her perception of the inequity of this situation.

Pha's Construction of Woman's Role as Wife in the U.S.

The sections of the interview in which Pha talks about a wife's role in the U.S. are markedly different from those above, stressing the freedom of movement and choice experienced by Lao women living in the U.S. In response to a question about the changes experienced by Laotian refugee families living in the U.S., Pha focuses her remarks on the changes women experience:

Example 6:

1 D: So when you say that sometimes families change when they
2 come here,
3 when Lao families come here to the U.S.,
4 they change to American culture,
5 what kind of things do you think they change,
6 how do they change?
7 P: They change their clothes
8 and they change, like a woman,
9 like a mother, like me,
10 and in some families,
11 the husband go outside
12 in the nighttime.
13 D: In here, in the U.S.?
14 P: Yes, in here. Play the cards.
15 D: Mm-hmm. Play cards.
16 P: And the wife go the same way.
17 Do the same way husband do.

18 Because they think as a woman have freedom.
19 D: That women have more freedom here.
20 Pha: Yeah. And the husband can't control the wife.

Counter to her previous remarks regarding gender roles in Laos, the woman is frequently the subject of Pha's sentences in this passage. In Example 6, Lines 7-9, she first remarks that "they" change their clothes, and then emphasizes that Lao women change, repeating "they change, like a woman, like a mother, like me," underscoring women's subjectivity and using nominal references which move from general "they" to the personal "me." Again, in Lines 16-17, the woman is the subject as Pha indicates that women have the ability to behave and to move in the world as men do. In the last line of this excerpt, Pha uses a negative modal construction, rare for a reference to a man, demonstrating the husband's lack of agency because of his inability to control his wife.

In the following excerpt, Pha develops her theme of women's greater freedom in the U.S., continuing to structure her utterances with the woman as subject:

Example 7:

1 P: The women, the Laotian woman, when they come to the
2 United States,
3 they very happy
4 D: Yeah, I'll bet.
5 P: Yeah, because they get freedom.
6 They can do everything like a man do.
7 D: Yeah, right. And I could see how that would really change
8 how the family works
9 P: Yes.
10 D: because it seems like when the man,
11 the mother and father in the family
12 have certain ways that they act
13 and when those change a lot,
14 it can change the whole family.
15 P: Yes.
16 D: Yeah. Huh, so Yeah.
17 P: And Laotian families in here, in the

18 North Philly, South Philly
19 They get divorce a lot.
20 D: Yeah, hmm.
21 P: Because the woman want to get divorce from the man
22 if man disagree, the woman don't care.
23 The man disagree with the wife, right?
24 D: Right.
25 P: But woman don't care.
26 I get the boyfriend and go out from you.
27 I leave you at home.

In Example 7, Line 1, Pha demonstrates her affective stance on women's greater freedom in the U.S., stating that Lao women are "very happy." In Line 6, Pha uses a modal construction to indicate that women have the ability to make choices as men do. Her statements about divorce of Lao couples in the U.S. are markedly different in their construction from her comments about divorce in Laos. Whereas she structured the man as the subject and decision-maker about divorce in Laos, here the subject in reference to divorce is "Laotian families" (Line 17), implying cooperative decision, and "the woman" (Line 21), positioning the woman as being able to express her own desires, even if that desire includes separating from her husband. Lines 26 and 27 demonstrate the most dramatic departure from Pha's construction of traditional Laotian gender roles, reversing the consistent metaphors of directionality and mobility and the theme of women's lack of agency. In these lines, the woman is positioned as agent, possessing the choice and mobility to leave her husband; it is the husband who is left at home lacking agency and mobility, the former place of the woman in traditional Lao gender roles.

The Changing Roles of Laotian Women in the U.S.

In exploring Pha's comments on the way in which Lao women's identities change through the process of acculturation, this paper focuses on the ways in which societal forces encourage change and the

ways in which women actively resist being positioned in the traditional Lao gender roles. In this excerpt, Pha illustrates that women are the force behind changing gender roles in Lao families living in the U.S.:

Example 8:

1 Pha: In heres, um, Laos Laos people, is uh,
2 man, right? Man is uh, they want to do the same thing
3 but the woman who's live heres long, about two, three years,
4 they know about Americans law,
5 and if husbands go out, have girlfriend
6 or have second wife, something like that,
7 and the wife's at home, they know about husband do like that.
8 They impatient, they go out too. They have boyfriend, too.
9 If husband say get divorced, they don't care. They get divorced.

Pha states in Example 8, Line 2 that men would prefer to retain traditional gender roles, but women actively resist this maintenance. This demonstrates Ochs' statement that individuals actively construct their social identity, rather than "live out a cultural prescription." However, women's ability to struggle actively for change hinges on their knowledge of and access to resources like "American law". Later in the interview, when Pha was again asked about the process by which Lao women change in the U.S., she responded:

Example 9:

1 D: How women change so much.
2 It doesn't make sense to me.
3 P: Um, because in here, is have police,
4 have friends, have, uh, communities,
5 help them about make the, make the woman stronger.
6 D: Huh, that's interesting.
7 P: But in Laos, nothing to help them about make them stronger.
8 Only tell her, patient and patient,
9 you is a woman, you is a mother.
10 You have to patient.
11 You cannot do anything except patient.
12 But in here
13 D: So that's what people would tell
14 P: Husband work, don't give me money,

15 I can work, too.
16 The companies want me to work, too, right?

In this excerpt Pha clarifies the effect of material resources on women's lives and on their ability to refuse the positioning of traditional gender roles. She mentions the importance of police, referring to an earlier comment that Laotian women learn that they can call the police if they are being beaten by their husband or boyfriend, a resource not available to women in Laos. She also stresses the importance of friends, communities, and access to paid work which support women and "make them stronger", enabling them to make new choices about how they realize their roles as women in the U.S.

Pha's Stance on Women's Roles in the U.S.

In order to examine Pha's stance on Laotian women's roles in the U.S., this paper examines conflicting comments she made about women's role as wife and contrast these with her comments about women's role as mother. Contrasting these perspectives provides a more complete and multifaceted perspective of Pha's stance on women's shifting gender role identities.

Pha identifies herself as a woman who embodies many of the traditional values of Lao culture. In a number of conversations, she referenced her adherence to the sociocultural rules for Lao women as daughter, wife, and mother. She maintains that she is raising her children, "the Lao way," stating, "I still love my culture, my tradition. I still do the same way in my country." In casual conversations with her and her husband, both spoke longingly of returning to Laos when the political situation becomes more favorable. At the same time, many of her comments about women's roles in Laos indicate a critical stance about women's lack of agency and a positive stance toward women's comparatively greater freedom in the U.S. When asked what she thought about women's roles in the U.S., Pha said:

Example 10:

1 P: I think it's very good thing.
2 I like America, I love America
3 because womans have freedom.
4 When I miss my country,
5 I think I want to go back,
6 but I think about not freedom,
7 D: Hmmm.
8 P: I don't want to go back.

This statement indicates a positive affective stance toward gender role constructions in the U.S. which are consistent with her previous comments about Lao women being "very happy" in the U.S. Because in earlier conversations she highlighted the difficulties which new gender roles place on Lao families, it was surprising that her response to life in the U.S. was so positive and unqualified. When asked about comments she had made earlier about high divorce rates for Lao families in the U.S. and some women's habit of staying out late and not taking care of their children, Pha acknowledged that these were problems. She commented that she felt they were caused by women's greater freedom in the U.S. However, she did not address the seeming contradictions between these two comments.

Although Pha states clearly that she perceives women's new roles in relationships as a positive step, when exploring women's agency in the role of mother, a very different theme emerges which serves to complicate the theme of greater agency in the U.S., as well as her positive stance on women's increased freedom. In an attempt to explore Lao women's role as agent in Laos, Pha was asked "What do women control, or what do women get to decide in Laos?" She made clear that women have no control in the husband-wife relationship, reiterating much of what she had said earlier about men's control over women. It wasn't until she was explicitly asked "Who controls the children in a family?" that Pha stated that women control chil-

dren in the family. Pha discussed decisions about and care for children more as a responsibility which fell to the woman than a right or locus of control.

Later in the same interview, however, Pha spoke of the honor and respect which children accord both parents in a traditional Lao family.

Example 11:

1 D: How would parents and children act in Laos?
2 P: Yeah, I, um, I think it's very, very different.
3 In Laos, the childrens is very honor for parents, for their parents.
4 They talk parents, good and politely.
5 And they do everything for parents.
6 But in here, the children never help parents.
7 I don't know.

This passage demonstrates that a Lao mother expects respect, honor, and assistance from her children. Although Pha does not explicitly state that this was a site of control, her following comments suggesting that she has lost control over her children in the U.S., indicate that control over their children is an important site of agency for Lao women.

Example 12:

1 P: Now I stay confusing about children.
2 (Pause)
3 D: What do you mean?
4 P: I thought is I lose O. now.
5 But, I still control second one.
6 D: Hmm. Do you think you've lost him?
7 P: Yeah, I think I lost him.
8 D: That's sad.
9 P: Too late for me help.
10 D: Yeah, that's sad.
11 P: But, I don't want my second son do like him.
12 D: Um-hmm. (Pause)
13 Yeah, it's hard.
14 P: I don't know what happened.
15 This morning we has conversation
16 about, uh, children. in America. Why?

17 We don't know.
18 The Cambodians, they don't know too.
19 But, I don't know too.
20 The children in here,
21 when they go to school and come back home,
22 they get, they stay in their room,
23 they don't want to talk with parents.
24 Every children, every parents say like that.
25 D: Hmm, every parent in the class said that?
26 P: Why they don't want to talk with parents?
27 Sometimes a whole days,
28 they, they don't talk to parents,
29 they don't talk to me.
30 D: Or to your husband?
31 Pha: Yeah.
32 D: The same?
33 P: The same.
34 They don't want to talk,
35 and they don't want to talk Lao, too.
36 The only want to talk together in English in their room.

This excerpt illustrates Pha's perception that she has lost one son, retaining tenuous control over the younger one. Her inability to exert influence and to make decisions for her children is a great source of sadness for her, which reflects her loss of this aspect of her agency as a woman. Pha's statements about children evidence a confusion about how to raise children in this new culture, particularly because the children do not want to talk to their parents.

The theme of talk was highlighted in the excerpt above in which Lao children demonstrate their respect for parents through talking "good and politely." In an earlier conversation, Pha emphasized the importance of talk in communicating rules in order to raise "good" children: "Parents, daughters following their culture, their tradition. And talk everyday, talk, talk, talk, and talk. Talk for that daughter, tell daughter, following their culture." Talk functions as a vehicle through which Lao parents inform children about their culture and their appropriate roles, as well as a vehicle through which children

demonstrate their respect and adherence to tradition. Pha's children's seeming refusal to talk with their parents and to speak Lao, demonstrates both a loss of language and a loss of culturally appropriate behavior. Phà's inability to talk to her children, positioning herself as the one possessing knowledge and the purveyor of traditional culture, signifies a great loss of control in her role as a woman.

Conclusion

Pha's acculturation process seems to have included significant gains and losses in her positioning as agent. She sees herself and other Laotian women in the U.S. as having gained control in the public sphere through access to paid work, welfare, community support, and police protection, contributing to their ability to assert their independence and agency within marriage. However, she also perceives herself as having lost control of the one aspect of agency so intimately connected to her construction of what it means to be a Lao woman, the ability to guide and instruct her own children.

Pha's stance on the process of acculturation as a confusing process fraught with both advantages and deep loss is not uncommon. Smith-Hefner's ethnography of Khmer refugee parents in the U.S. speaks to this difficult process:

> As they watch [their] children rapidly and seemingly effortlessly becoming fluent in English, many Khmer parents are beginning to wonder what is being lost in the process. Issues of language and identity are central to their concern. (Smith-Hefner 1990: 254)

Pha's reflections on her own changing identity have crucial implications for how ESL teachers can address students' concerns throughout the process of acculturation. Although many ESL texts

make an effort to discuss "culture," this is often only a surface attempt with activities centered around discussion of cultural holidays, gestures, or foods. Although these activities may be useful for students who are newly arrived in the U.S., they fail to address the concerns of students like Pha who have lived in the U.S. for a longer period of time and are familiar with many of these differences. For these students it is the more deeply held, less obvious aspects of culture, like gender roles and parenting practices, which are of greater concern.

For ESL teachers to begin to explore the ways in which the process of acculturation affects deep aspects of a student's culture and for policy makers to make appropriate choices to fund organizations which can support this process, the field must learn more about the lived experience of acculturation from the perspective of immigrant and refugee families. In so doing, we must take into account the multitude of situated identities which shift in this process and the ways in which women like Pha experience significant identity shifts in the their roles of mother, wife, and daughter.

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